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SOCIAL DECADENCE

EDWARD ALSWORTH ROSS
University of Wisconsin

Decadence carries the idea of the raveling of a web, the crumbling of a wall that once was strong, the falling to pieces of a structure that has rotted at the joints. The decadent society will be one that sinks below a former level of unity, vigor, and efficiency. Perhaps loyalty shifts from society to its subordinate groups, so that the spirit of caste or sect or faction or clan overrides feeling for the whole. Perhaps the sub-groups themselves are weakened by the spread of the spirit of each for himself. Egoism may go so far that the only social unit able to thrive is the *band*—i.e., the group formed about a strong man and promising immediate material advantages. Society decays when the laws, customs, and beliefs tending to keep within bounds the selfishness of individuals are not respected as of yore. The spiritual web enmeshing men gives way. There are more contradictions among people than formerly and fewer agreements, more discords and fewer harmonies, more clashings and fewer co-operations. Not only has the I-feeling gained on the we-feeling, but the bonds uniting successive generations may fail, so that there is less veneration for forefathers and less care for posterity.

Various are the external causes which may contribute to the decay of a society. One of these is *a change of climate for the worse*. In Central America, Chinese Turkestan, Mesopotamia, Cambodia, and Rhodesia are found imposing ruins which testify to the handiwork of peoples far above the present inhabitants in culture and organization. In Bolivia, a few miles south of Lake Titicaca, have been brought to light the remains of a forgotten city which could hardly have counted fewer than a million inhabitants. The impossibility of such multitudes growing their food on a bleak plateau at an elevation of 12,500 feet above sea level has led to the startling hypothesis that this civilization flourished at a time so

remote that the Andean uplift had not yet risen more than eight or nine thousand feet above the ocean! In Central Asia the discovery of cities long buried under desert sand affords the principal ground for the pulsatory theory of climatic changes formulated by Dr. Ellsworth Huntington. If the alleged changes are substantiated, we have the key to a downfall which heretofore has been attributed to some mysterious internal cause.

Subjugation is another cause of the breaking up of society. Almost always conquest shatters or destroys the social organization of the conquered; frequently it subjects them to conditions which warp or corrupt their character and in the end make them incompetent to maintain a normal group life. Note the pliant and slippery character of the peoples that have long lain under the blight of the Turk. The Mongol yoke left upon the soul of the Russian people deep scars, which even now after four centuries have not been effaced. The Irish are very different from what they would be had they been as much left to themselves as the Scotch. Or let one compare the social consciousness of the Japanese with that of the East Indians, and he will perceive how, in the latter, subjugation and mixture have contributed to produce a narrow and selective grouping along the lines of blood relationship, occupation, and religion, instead of the broad and comprehensive grouping of a free people.

Society rests on *land* and *people*, so that, if either deteriorates, society sags, twists, or falls, like a house when its foundation is breaking down. We know now that, quite in its day's work, a people can so dissipate or use up its natural resources as to leave the land scarcely habitable. Behind some of the great tragedies of history we are just beginning to glimpse soil exhaustion. In the early Roman Republic, as in China and Japan today, a four-acre plot was deemed enough to support a family. But the allotments of the Gracchi were twenty acres in extent, those of the triumvirs, thirty acres, those of Caesar, forty acres. Before the imperial period the scantness of the grain crops stood in such harsh contrast to the tales of older fertility that agricultural writers generally held the theory that mother-earth was approaching old age; that, like a woman, she had reached that point in her life when

one ceases to bring forth. Columella recommends the vine, because in the greater part of Italy no one can recall when grain produced fourfold—i.e., four to six bushels to the acre! It was in just the longest-tilled parts that the soil had become leanest. In old Latium, Varro cites Pupinia "where the foliage is meager, the vines look starved, where the scant straw never stools, nor the fig tree blooms, and trees and parched meadows are largely covered with moss." Two centuries later Columella refers to entire Latium as a country where only imported food kept the people alive.

Social exhaustion doubtless brought on such profound social changes as the turning of tilled land into pasture, the indebtedness and ruin of the Latin yeomen, the growth of great estates (*latifundia*), the formation of the urban populace, the exaction of a grain tribute from the provinces, the deliberate conquest of grain-producing countries, and the development of Rome into a huge parasite, living, as Seneca puts it, "on the spoils of all nations." But since Rome sucked food from the provinces, the shadow of soil exhaustion presently fell upon them also. Sicily, Sardinia, North Africa, Spain, went the way of Italy, which in Sophocles' time had been a granary for Greece. Only Egypt, annually refertilized by the Nile slime, escaped exhaustion.¹

It is only within a generation that we have perceived how a people prepares its ruin by a reckless destruction of the natural forest. In China deeply gulled plateaus, guttered hillsides, choked watercourses, silted-up bridges, sterilized bottom lands, bankless wandering rivers, dyked torrents that have built up their beds till they meander at the level of the tree tops, and mountain brooks as thick as pea soup testify to the changes wrought once the reckless ax has let loose the force of running water to resculpture the landscape. What I observed in Shansi along the Fên River is typical:

Once the tree cover is removed, the rains wash the soil from the hillsides and with it fill the watercourses and choke the valleys. Wherever a brook or a creek debouches into the valley of the Fên, it has built with this wash a great alluvial cone, curving down-river, and along the crest of this cone runs the shallow gravelly bed of the stream that once loitered under high banks three or four fathoms beneath its present level. This cone has covered under silt

¹ See Simkovitch, "Rome's Fall Reconsidered," *Political Science Quarterly*, XXXI.

and sand and gravel from a few score acres to several miles of the former rich bottom lands and they can never be recovered.

Buildings are imbedded to the waist in the debris. Gateways that once one could ride a camel through, one can now only creep through on hands and knees. Twice we came upon majestic stone bridges which once spanned broad affluents of the Fên, but which now, their noble arches half silted up, stand unused amid fields of beans and rape, sad monuments of a bygone prosperity. Since the bridge was built, twenty feet of wash from deforested hills has been dropped in that watercourse and the stream, no longer fed from spongy wooded slopes, is a trickle or an underground moisture in summer and a raging flood in the rainy season.¹

From the once-wooded hills opposite Hong Kong the soil has been washed away till the country is nothing but granite boulders. North of the Gulf of Tonkin, it is said, not a tree is to be seen and the surviving balks between the fields show that areas once cultivated have become waste. Erosion stripped the earth down to the clay and the land had to be abandoned. One hears of districts, once populous, in which the mountains are dry, gray skeletons, the rich bottom sands lie smothered under silt, and there is now one family to four square miles.

Says Marsh in his *Man and Nature*:

There are parts of Asia Minor, of Northern Africa, of Greece, and even of Alpine Europe, where the operation of causes set in action by man has brought the face of earth to a desolation almost as complete as that of the moon; and though, within that brief space of time men call the "historical period," they are known to have been covered with luxuriant woods, verdant pastures, and fertile meadows, they are now too far deteriorated to be reclaimable by man; nor can they become again fitted for human use except through great geological changes, or other mysterious influences or agencies of which we have no present knowledge or over which we have no prospective control.

The destructive changes occasioned by the agency of man upon the flanks of the Alps, the Apennines, the Pyrenees, and other mountain ranges in Central and Southern Europe, and the progress of physical deterioration have become so rapid that, in some localities, a single generation has witnessed the beginning and the end of the melancholy revolution.

At her zenith Greece was a fertile, well-wooded, healthful, and very populous country with, perhaps, as many people as Belgium or Pennsylvania. Two centuries later, at the time of the Roman

¹ Ross, *The Changing Chinese*, p. 271.

conquest, the country was poor and but sparsely populated. All Hellas, according to Plutarch, could put in the field not more than three thousand fully armed troops. Strabo noticed that in his time nearly all the mountains seen from the coast were denuded, while the valleys and plains were ravaged by malaria. What had happened was that the rush to the cities left the countryside short of laborers, so that pastures replaced tilled fields. Every summer, when the plain was parched, the herds were driven into the mountains where they browsed or trampled down the seedlings, the result being that in time the forest perished. Then the soil, no longer bound in place by living roots, began to wash down the slopes until the mountains died. Swamps formed and whole districts had to be abandoned on account of malaria. In Spain the extension of cultivation to the heights resulted in deforestation and ruined the soil, but on the plateau of Castile the climate was adverse to *anopheles*; malaria took possession only of certain low and humid districts of Andalusia.

If from any cause a people becomes sappy and brittle, there will be a slump in the quality of its group life. Now, there are various things which may change for the worse the hereditary fiber of a people. One is the cityward flow. The glittering cities lure the brightest youth from the field and tempt them to strain for the prizes of success. But there they marry later, die sooner, and leave fewer children than the dull cousins that stayed on the farm. Invariably, until about a century ago, cities were consumers of men, their deaths always exceeding their births, so that nothing kept them up but the endless inflow from the country. The fact that the urban population can reproduce itself today should not lead us to forget how for centuries cities were blast furnaces where the talented rose and became incandescent, to be sure, but were, nevertheless, incinerated without having duly reproduced themselves.

A strong and long-continued emigration, when it takes away the more hardy and enterprising, is likely to lower the quality of a people. The great outflow of Greeks, particularly after Alexander's conquests had opened all Western Asia to them, may have had something to do with the flatness of the Silver Age. The conquest and peopling of the Americas and the Philippines drained Spain of

numbers she could ill spare. An outflow caused by persecution for ideas takes away cream, as we plainly see by the record of the fugitive Huguenots and the hounded sectaries that founded certain American colonies. On the other hand, an emigration in quest of wages in well-policed new countries probably carries away elements which, on the whole, are below rather than above the average of their people. In general the deeper, straighter, and smoother the channels of migration, the lower the stratum they can tap.

Under Darwinian influence, Seeck, historian of the later Roman Empire, undertakes to account for the world-historic decadence of ancient society by social misselection. The decay of ancient Greece, marked by a lamentable lowering of ability in every department of culture, he connects with the ferocious party struggles between aristocrats and democrats. In these struggles, at each turn of fortune's wheel, all persons of distinction belonging to the defeated party were banished or slaughtered. Thus we read of seven hundred families being exiled at one time from Athens, one thousand leading citizens executed at Mitylene, four thousand at Gela. In generations of such savage work the contending factions contrived to drain Greece of her best blood, and left to her insignificant and mediocre families an inglorious and decadent future.

In like manner Seeck connects the decline of ability among the Romans, and especially the notable decline in their courage and force of character, with the wholesale massacres of the Social Wars. Marius and Cinna murdered the aristocrats and their personal enemies by thousands, Sulla extirpated the democrats with equal ferocity, and the remaining noble blood was spilled under the proscriptions of the triumvirs. All the bold were slain; only cowards remained alive, and from their progeny issued the timid, characterless generations of the Lower Empire.

Be warned, however, that nothing is more hazardous than inferences as to race decadence in past epochs. Unlike soil impoverishment and deforestation, remote changes in the stream of heredity cannot be measured. Even now it is impossible to make sure whether or not our own people are degenerating, let alone bygone peoples. We have not yet made out the drift of insanity

among us, or whether the feeble-minded have gained on other stocks. It is hardly a decade since the invention of mental tests permitted the classification of certain persons as "subnormal" to be something else than a mere matter of opinion. Until we have gauged the selections going on among ourselves, it is surely vain to speculate as to the net effect of the changes that went on in the proportions of stocks in any ancient people.

Besides these causes of decadence lying *outside* of society or *under* it, there may develop *within* society toxins which poison it. One such toxin is *an overgrowth of institutions*, so great as to weaken character, destroy liberty, and intimidate the originaive minds whose mission it is to initiate the movements necessary to adapt society to changed conditions.

Take, for example, the case of Spain. In the course of eight centuries of wars at once national and religious, loyalty and religious fervor grew to be dominant passions. Poverty and ignorance, the necessary result of incessant warfare, helped develop that unquestioning obedience to king and priest which became the outstanding characteristic of the Spanish people. So the time arrived when state and church were able to rule over the people at will. The former, with long, exhausting, foreign wars on behalf of religion; the latter, with the expulsion of the Moors, the forced emigration of the Jews, and the extermination of most original variant minds by means of the Inquisition, so wasted the strength of the people that by the end of the seventeenth century retrogression was visible in all departments of national life. Population had shrunk, Madrid having lost half her numbers within a century. Much soil had gone out of cultivation. Seville had lost all but three hundred of her sixteen thousand looms; Toledo, all but thirteen of her fifty woolen manufactories. The fisheries had so fallen away that they could not furnish sailors for a few royal ships. Charts had been lost and Spanish pilots had become ignorant of their own waters. It was impossible to pay the army or to man the fleet. The upper classes knew nothing of science or literature and were unacquainted with the most momentous events outside their own country. All books, save books of devotion, were despised; no one collected them or consulted them. The French ambassador at

Madrid summed up the state of education by saying: "In Spain science is a crime and ignorance a virtue."

Although in the eighteenth century certain strong sovereigns, using able foreigners as their instruments of reform, produced an artificial progress, the people were still obsessed, and it needed but a single reactionary king to bring down the new structure. The power of the clergy was restored and darkness again fell. Even yet, after agonizing struggles to share in the general movement of humanity toward freedom and light, the Spanish mind bears deep traces of the servitude to which it was subjected by its ancient blind loyalty to throne and church.

In Athens we come upon a social decadence originating in the sphere of intellect. It seems as if in a nation's life-history *organic* epochs alternate with *critical* epochs. In the former, society is built up on the basis of ideas and ideals springing out of common experiences. Among a people like the Athenians, who had had to struggle against difficult external conditions and who could not have survived without team work, the we-feeling is strong and general. In this period great artists, like Aeschylus and Sophocles, feel themselves one with their people and exalt the broad, simple, general, human qualities. They glorify the heroic and the universal.

The next generation, secure and prosperous, has no such pressing need to pull together. The great achievements of the past are piled before their eyes. The national art has reached sublime heights. The less original spirits are tempted to become parasites on the products of their illustrious predecessors, so that a host of imitators springs into existence. As for the stronger spirits, they find themselves at odds with national traditions. Perceiving that the heroes and gods of the old dramatists are mythical, they reject the naïve religious and patriotic ideas of the folk mind. Euripides takes this analytic critical attitude. In the *Frogs* Aristophanes sets him and Aeschylus against each other as representing two great opposed tendencies. The critical spirit of Euripides, his sarcasm, his ridicule, his faultfinding, all help to dissolve the common beliefs that hold people together. Out of touch with simple people, he stresses the qualities which distinguish him and

other intellectuals from the mass, not the broad traits they all have in common. Thus in Euripides' tragedies we discover that striving after effect and novelty, that desire to show one's ingenuity, which are sure symptoms of individualistic art.

In the following period the effect of the disintegrative critical spirit working upon a thwarted and war-worn people becomes manifest. Faith in one's fellows, in the high destiny of one's people, is gone. The accepted aim is to get the most out of life as an individual. Teachers make private life rather than public life the subject of inquiry and precept. The sentiment of patriotism is so weak that mercenaries make up the army. The ardor for liberty has died down. "How much better is it," exclaims Menander, "to be under a good master than to live in poverty and be free!" He also coins the maxim: "He who fights and runs away may live to fight another day." Politics are abandoned by the best classes, and the gifted retire to schools of philosophy. The lower natures become dissolute, the higher become aloof and self-centered. One of the intellectuals, Callimachus, voices the sentiment: "I hate the cyclic poem, nor do I delight in a road that carries many hither and thither; I detest, too, a gadabout charmer, and I drink not from the fountain; I loathe everything popular."

Without its folk root the Greek religion of this period is full of ceremonies and foreign gods. In literature the endeavor to startle is now carried so far that in one long poem there is a riddle in every line. Similes are heaped up for their own sake rather than to make the point clear. Temples are no longer built; it is house architecture which now develops. In a word, ancestors, posterity, the group, no longer give life its meaning. To get the most out of it for me and mine is the end of living.

Late in the last century the French passed through such a critical epoch, during which great writers and artists relentlessly dissected, not only all elements of religious faith, but, as well, all moral, social, and civic ideals. The result was a movement toward unbridled individualism culminating in a widespread moral disorganization, the symptoms of which were so plain early in the nineties that the French got the repute of being a "decadent" and negligible people. About this time the group sense of self-

preservation took alarm, the intellectuals realized that negativism had gone too far, and there was a reaction in the direction of building up sound ideals in the rising generation. Education was redirected, social aims came up in politics, and a fine idealism reappeared in literature. The France reborn out of such influences has in the war won the admiration of the world by her superb exhibition of character and solidarity.

The predominance of city life, by changing the mode of organization of the social mind, may open the door to decay. The countryman, rooted in inherited beliefs and steadied by his first-hand experience with the concrete, is not easily swayed. But the townsman, mobile, skeptical, eager for sensation, prompt in response, is an ideal pipe on which the demagogue may play. Of Cleon, the idol of the Athenian assembly and the law courts, who led Athens into a disastrous imperialism and militancy, Aristotle says: "It is he, who seems to have done most to corrupt the people by means of their own instincts." Thucydides calls attention to the fact that Pericles really led the people, instead of allowing himself to be led by them. "On the contrary," he adds, "as those who came after him had no marked superiority to distinguish them, and yet were anxious to surpass one another, they forced themselves to please the masses and allowed them to manage public affairs."

Here, then, is a situation pregnant with evil—an omnipotent urban democracy meeting constantly in a single large assembly and managing a government which makes little call for technical knowledge. Under these circumstances it would be a miracle if the people let themselves be guided by their élite. As they gather self-confidence, the blunt statesman, who frequently brings them up with a turn and exposes the folly of their impulses and first thoughts, will stand no chance against the flattering orator. One who addresses their reason will have no such influence as one who appeals to their instincts and feelings. In a clever, leisured, city-people, organized in this fashion, the demagogue finds a tuned instrument on which to play.

A like tendency to put the lower parts of human nature above the higher lurks in the leadership of the modern newspaper. The newspaper has a great and growing power over the public mind

owing to its fixing the perspective in which current events are seen by the reader. By controlling the distribution of emphasis in the telling of facts, by stressing day by day one sort of facts and keeping the opposite sort in the background, by giving the news which he wants noticed the front page and bold type, while giving the news he wants overlooked an inside page and nonpareil, the newspaper-owner manufactures the impressions that breed opinion and, if he controls a chain of important newspapers, he may virtually make public opinion without the public knowing it!

What he will make it depends upon the conditions of competition in newspaper publishing. Consulting his own interest, the newspaper proprietor is tempted to curry favor with the public by appealing to its foolish prejudices rather than to affront such prejudices and patiently build up in his readers a rational opinion. If he chooses the latter course, his trade rivals will quickly seize their opportunity to lure away his readers by taking the former line; so that, long before he will have educated the public to follow his lead, his rivals will have the circulation and advertising, leaving him with a small but select body of readers plus an approving conscience. In short, there operates in the newspaper field a kind of Gresham's law. Says Mr. Norman Angell:

Just as in commerce debased coin, if there be enough of it, must drive out the sterling, so in the contest of motives, actions which respond to the more primitive feelings and impulses, first thoughts, established prejudice, can be stimulated by the modern newspaper far more easily than action which is prompted by rationalized second thought. Any newspaper appealing to the former group of motives must "get away with it" long before that which appeals to the second can establish its case.

The remedy for this sinister tendency is not the curbing of newspapers, but the strengthening of corrective influences. The pulpit addresses itself to the deeper parts of human nature rather than to the more easily awakened instincts. The teacher relies on organized information rather than on organized emotion to bring about the reforms he desires. The writer of a book more often addresses the reader's intelligence than the newspaper writer, so that the use of public libraries has a steadying effect. Adult education through university extension makes for calm judgment

on public affairs. The amazing growth of high schools contributes greatly to the number of steady-minded people. The spread of community centers is another offset to the newspaper. Thanks to these institutions, Americans, for all their reading of newspapers, do not generally show the political psychology which seems to be produced wherever the influence of newspapers is not balanced by influences of a more sober tendency.

Decay sets in after the we-feeling has died out of the hearts of many members of a group. This will happen if the social system comes to embody plain injustice. The poor generally do not resent great inequalities in lot, provided society still is fluid and competitive. They comfort themselves with the hope, "If I can't get up, some child of mine will." But the pushful capables who have won their way to power or wealth do their best to throw down the ladders they climbed by, so as to make their sons and grandsons safe from other capables. Perish society, if only we may save our family line! So the successful wall themselves off into a hereditary caste and a sense of injustice spreads among the masses.

We see now why a large and flourishing middle class is a guaranty of social health. It means plenty of stepping-stones leading up from bottom to top of society. It means a circulation of individuals between classes, which keeps alive hope in the ambitious youth of the lower orders. Moreover, such a middle class mediates between the extreme classes, trims the boat, so it shall not capsize. It allows neither aristocrats nor populace to have its way with the other. It prevents the state from becoming a class-state, and social institutions from becoming mere props of injustice.

The dwindling or disappearance of the middle class, leaving the people in two camps, poor and rich, is, therefore, an ill omen. On the one hand, is a nobility of wealth that, having rid itself of every useful service to society, has given itself up to luxurious enjoyment; on the other, a rough, uncouth, unbridled, and irresponsible peasantry or populace—and no broad bridges leading from the one to the other. Neither camp feels that the other is a part of "us." Each feels that its interests will be sacrificed if the other gets the upper hand, and will therefore go to any length to gain and to keep power. In a word, the national society is dead, and in its place are

two class groups, occupying the same territory and interdependent in various ways, yet either willing to call in the national enemy rather than yield to the sway of the other.

Again, society may decay because of a deterioration in the character of the people. Once a social standpipe has been erected, a people's character is formed, not only by its daily experiences, but also by the models set before it by social superiors. If these should become luxury-loving and soft, their traits might gradually sap the manhood of the people. In Sparta, on the other hand, the military ideal in time caused the hard egoistic type of character to prevail to such a degree as to make true society impossible. Perhaps none are so sedulously patterned after as those who achieve a conspicuous success. If they are seen to get to the top by rapacity, deceit, and corruption, youth will form itself on their bad model. This is why it is not the petty crooks of dive and alley that are most dangerous to society, but the big crooks, who, unwhipped, steal, cheat, or bribe their way to the social dais. Both rob, but the latter also rot, the national character, because the rising generation take their ways as proper means of getting on in the world.